

BYZANTINE CHANT, WESTERN MUSICOLOGY AND THE PERFORMER

by Alexander Lingas

Then we went on to Greece, and the Greeks led us to the edifices where they worship their God, and we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor of beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We know only that God dwells there among men, and their service is fairer than the ceremonies of other nations. - *Report of the emissaries sent abroad by Prince Vladimir of Kiev in 987 A.D. to help him choose a new religion for the Russian people.*¹

Over the course of the 20th century, the historical significance of Byzantine chant has been well-established by a number of scholars.² Its origins reach back to the great hymnographers of the Patristic Age, while its notated history covers a millenium: from the 10th century to the present day. The *octoechos* (the system of eight ecclesiastical modes) and a number of Western chants are known to be of Eastern origin, to say nothing of the great liturgical and theological debt owed by the Latin West to the Greek and Syriac East.

Unfortunately, despite the accumulation of evidence pointing to its importance in the history of Western music, Byzantine chant remains *terra incognita*: a realm on the edges of the known musical world "where monsters lurk." Even among musicologists, those custodians of the musically-obscure (among whom this writer is also numbered), Eastern Christian chant is usually left to a small circle of specialists, outside of which it is regarded with a mixture of dim recognition and polite indifference. Of course, highly technical studies continue to appear in the official organs of the musicological establishment from time to time, but one often gets the feeling that publication is not a reflection of any genuine musical interest on the part of their colleagues, but a reward for ascetic labor.

Obviously, something is amiss here. Why, in the wake of the early music revival and some sixty-odd years after the founding of the *Monumenta Musicae Byzantinae* (MMB) by Egon Wellesz, H.J.W. Tillyard and Carsten Hoeg, has Medieval Byzantine chant failed to find any sort of audience? Could it really be, as Joseph Kerman seems to suggest, that it is merely second-rate mu-

sic?³ And what, then, is one to do with the testimony of Prince Vladimir's emissaries, who found such incomparable beauty in the Eastern rites? Were they just uncouth bumpkins from the Russian steppes who didn't know any better?

On the contrary, while they may have been 'barbarians' (to use the term of the day), it seems more likely that the Russian boyars, when describing their visit to St. Sophia in Constantinople, knew exactly what they were talking about. Even today, similar feelings continue to be inspired among those who have the privilege of attending an all-night vigil at one of the monasteries of Mt. Athos in Greece. Given the richness of the historical record and the vibrancy of the present performing tradition in the Orthodox churches of Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and the Middle East, it is this writer's contention that a number of problems, lying closer to home, are largely responsible for the recalcitrant status of Byzantine chant in the West.

The most obvious (and most easily excused) factors inhibiting the dissemination of Byzantine music in the West are largely cultural and linguistic. Historical events, like the Great Schism between Eastern and Western Christianity in 1054 and the 500-year Ottoman occupation of the Balkans, also fostered a cultural estrangement that resulted in centuries of separate development. Consequently, it should be of little surprise that many Western scholars are only interested in the points where the two societies directly intersect. This situation is compounded by the decline of classical studies and widespread ignorance of the Greek language. However, to lay the blame solely on Western cultural snobbery or linguistic ineptitude is neither fair nor accurate. The language barrier failed to prevent a number of path-breaking studies by scholars of liturgy, resulting in a complete overhaul of the Daily Office in the Episcopal and Lutheran prayerbooks along Eastern Orthodox lines. Alternatively, Tillyard's inclusion of optional Latin texts with a set of his transcriptions has

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not increased the frequency of their performance.⁴ Searching further, therefore, for the root causes of the present state of affairs, one comes upon a critical anomaly that differentiates Byzantine musicology from other fields of musicological study: the radical isolation of most Byzantine musicologists from, and their relative lack of concern for, any actual performance of the chant.

In the realm of Western European music, performers and musicologists, even when they enter into conflict, have their origins in a common musical heritage. Occasionally, they even manage to find common cause and work in tandem toward the revival of a forgotten repertory, as has been the case with the spectacularly successful early music revival. In sharp contrast, Byzantine musicologists and the most likely audience for their discoveries, the thousands of modern Byzantine cantors, have been at war since the beginning of this century. Basically speaking, the cantors have emphasized the continuity of their living tradition with the chant of the past, while the musicologists of the *MMB* have regarded the modern 'Neo-Byzantine' tradition as decadent, almost indistinguishable from Turkish music, and therefore unworthy of study. While it is obvious that excessive arguments for continuity (bordering on perpetual stasis) by the Greek musicologist K. Psachos and others⁵ have only exacerbated the conflict, the Western Byzantinists must accept blame for what comes close to cultural imperialism.

Until the late 1960s, the attention of Western musicologists was focused on music from the 10th to 13th centuries, initially in the hope of causing a Solesmes-style 'restoration' of Medieval Byzantine chant (i.e. the Greeks were to abandon their living tradition for the historical transcriptions of the *MMB*). Much of the music from this period, like the workaday chant of today's Byzantine office, is of a fairly simple centonate construction. The melodic formulae for each mode are easily memorized, allowing the singer to improvise a melody to a given text in any one of the eight modes.⁶ With the additional aid of an elaborate system of model melodies (*automela* and *beirmot*) and contrafacta (*prosomota*), a cantor only needs to use notation for elaborate compositions or for didactic purposes. This system, as anyone who actually has to sing Orthodox services knows, does not stem from any lack of musical imagination, but is a necessity because of the sheer volume of texts. In addition to the Ordinary, there are 15 (!) volumes of Propers for the church year, rendering any attempt to notate every hymn futile or, in the case of the contrafacta, superfluous. The resulting musical idiom is not merely text-based, but often text-driven.⁷

Perhaps more than coincidentally, musical notation ap-

peared in the 10th century, just as the major service books were being completed and poetic activity was beginning to decline. The real rise of musical composition 'for music's sake' in Byzantium only began in earnest in the 14th century (a period already considered decadent by Wellesz and Strunk), when named composers of elaborate 'kalophonic' chants suddenly proliferated. It is this tradition, closely associated with the work of the Athonite monk John Koukouzeles, that has continued to grow and develop until the present day.

Thankfully, the conflicts between musicologists and cantors are now subsiding. At the same time when Solesmes has thoroughly revised its ideas and Gregorian chant scholars are talking about vocal slides and microtones, it is no longer tenable for Western Byzantinists to complain (much) about 'Turkish' performance practice. Indeed, Marcel Pérès and his Ensemble Organum have reversed the process with their speculative but thoroughly enjoyable recordings of Old Roman and Ambrosian Chant done in a 'Neo-Byzantine style'.⁸ Simultaneously, the number of studies on the later periods of musical activity is growing.

Unfortunately for the prospective performer, many of the recent transcriptions are still hampered by the *MMB*'s 'purist' (agnostic might be a better word) approach to rhythm and chromaticism. While this method of transcription may be a safe choice for a scholar seeking publication, it often produces music that requires considerable further guesswork to come up with a performance that makes musical sense. This is especially true of the virtuosic 'kalophonic' repertoire, which is neither virtuosic nor beautiful in the transcriptions of the *MMB*, but merely tedious. Although space prohibits a full discussion of this complex problem, the reader will get some idea of the situation if he or she will imagine Couperin's table of ornaments with all the rhythmic subdivisions removed.

Until such a time as more definite solutions to these problems can be reached, the author suggests that the best approach to performing Medieval Byzantine chant is to apply judiciously elements of Neo-Byzantine performance practice. Depending on the repertoire, the performer will have to make more or less use of his or her own musical intuition. Extra caution should be used regarding the delicate questions of chromaticism and the scale of Mode Barys (plagal III), for which there is evidence of a significant change in practice in the 18th and early 19th century.⁹ In any case, the author invites performers to familiarize themselves with this estranged sibling of Gregorian chant, for it will be primarily through their efforts, and not those of musicologists, that the chant which fostered the baptism of Kievan Rus' will live again.

NOTES

1. Excerpt from the "Primary Chronicle," in *Medieval*
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Russia's Epics, Chronicles and Tales, ed. by Serge A. Zenkovsky (New York: 1974), 67.

2. For example, see Egon Wellesz, *A History of Byzantine Music and Hymnography*, 2nd. ed.

3. Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge, MA, 1985), 45.

4. H.J.W. Tillyard, *Twenty Canons from the Trinity Heirmologium*, MMB Transcripta 4.

5. The "stenographic" theory of Medieval Byzantine music, which asserts that only a change in notation, but not in actual melody, has occurred over the centuries. For a recent articulation of this theory, see G. Stathis, "An Analysis of the Sticheron *Ton helion krypsanta* by Germanos, Bishop of New Patras," in *Studies in Eastern Chant* 4, M. Velimirovic, ed. (Crestwood, N.Y.: 1979).

6. All modern Greek cantors also have this ability. On one occasion, the author was incited to chant a list of beers on tap in all the eight modes.

7. This is not surprising when one considers that the Orthodox Church's patron saint of music, St. Romanos the Melodist (6th c.), wrote poetry of exceptional beauty for which no music survives. Incidentally, the same is also true of the ancient Greek lyric and epic poets, who sang their works to music that has been lost.

8. *Chants de l'église de Rome* (HMC-901218) and *Chants de l'église Milanais* (HMC-901295).

9. This information was communicated to the author by Dr. Frank Desby, a noted authority on Neo-Byzantine theory.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Conomos, Dimitri E. *Byzantine Hymnography and Byzantine Chant*. Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1984. A short but informative introduction to the subject.

_____. *Byzantine Trisagion and Cheroubika of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*. Thessalonica: Patriarchal Institute of Patristic Studies, 1974. Although done according to the method of the MMB, this book contains a number of interesting transcriptions.

Desby, Frank Harry. "The Modes and Tuning in Neo-Byzantine Chant." PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1974. The best book on modern Byzantine chant available in English. Dr. Desby has also recently completed a book geared the performer, which will be published sometime in the next few years.

Wellesz, Egon. *A History of Byzantine Music and Hymnology*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947. This book contains much that is out of date, but is still useful.

_____. *Eastern Elements in Western Chant*. MMB Subsidia, vol. 2. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947. In need of substantial revision, this book discusses the relationship of Byzantine chant to its Western siblings.

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